DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 273 CS 208 304

AUTHOR Gwin, Louis M., Jr.
TITLE PR Internships: A View from Both Sides of the Fence.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (67th, Gainesville, FL, August 5-8, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Opportunities; *Education Work Relationship; Employment Potential; Higher Education; *Internship Programs; *Journalism Education; Program Development; *Public Relations; *Student Experience

ABSTRACT

There is a growing awareness among students that public relations internships provide not only a means for testing skills, but also valuable experience that can be placed on a resume. This has created keen competition among students for internships, thereby providing practitioners with a considerable talent pool from which to select competent interns. Internships also provide students with future employment opportunities through contacts made during the internship, further heightening competition among students for internships. This has required teachers to become more inventive in developing internship opportunities for students. Interns can make a meaningful contribution to an organization's public relations effort if work is properly supervised and directed. Such direction should come principally from the organization using the intern and not from the intern's academic advisor. (Author/HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED244273

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

PR Internships: A View From Both Sides of the Fence

Louis M. Gwin, Jr.
Department of Communication Studies
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, Virginia

Association for Education
In Journalism and Mass Communication Convention
Gainesville, Florida
August 1984

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Louis M. Gwin, Jr.
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 208 304

While newspaper internships have been the subject of numerous journal articles, research and comment concerning public relations internships are practically non-existent. This is puzzling, considering that most schools and departments of journalism and mass communications have placed increasing emphasis on public relations internships in recent years, a move strongly supported by the Public Relations Society of America.[1]

This is not to say that the recent literature has totally avoided the subject. Some attention has been given to the "Pro-Am" (professional-amateur) programs at schools which "match" upper-level students with PRSA professionals in on-the-job situations.[2] And others have pointed out that PR internships do contain some thorns among the roses, particularly in the areas of defining the company's relationship to the student ("Are we teacher or employer?") and simply of finding enough meaningful internship opportunities to go around.[3]

However, the majority of articles that mention PR internships, while indicating that both practitioners and academics generally agree such programs are a valuable component of a public relations curriculum, devote little attention to the mechanics of operating PR internship programs.[4]

One possible answer to the question of why so little attention to the "nuts and bolts" of PR internships may be an assumption that "all internships are created equal" and that

the rewards and problems of newspaper internships are shared equally by students on the PR side of the house. While many similarities probably do exist between the two internship areas, I believe that public relations internships have enough unique characteristics to merit more than the cursory glance that the present literature affords.

I come to this viewpoint after having recently left a 13-year career as a public relations practitioner to teach public relations and reporting at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. Today I am helping arrange internships for students who are enrolled in the public relations/public information option offered by Virginia Tech's Department of Communication Studies. Approximately one year ago I was Assistant Director of Information (Media Relations) for the Tennessee Valley Authority in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I administered a cooperative public relations internship program with the College of Communications of the University of Tennessee.[5]

This somewhat unique perspective of having observed public relations interns from opposite sides of the same fence has given me an appreciation for the practical problems of both utilizing student interns in actual public relations situations and in creating internship opportunities for eager students who want to try out their newly-learned skills in the "real world." My purpose here is to set some of these observations down on paper, not because they are particularly brilliant or insightful, but because they have been distilled

from the experiences of one who has been both practitioner and teacher, and as such may be helpful to one or both groups.

My first observation is the somewhat simplistic notion that today's students, perhaps like never before, recognize the value of having some work experience in their chosen profession on the resume when beginning the serious business of job hunting. I classify this a simplistic statement because those of us who have been on the "hiring line" have always given added weight to the experienced job candidate. But my own personal experience leads me to believe that only in recent years have public relations students placed similar weight on obtaining such experience before graduation, perhaps due in part to the heavy competitiveness in the PR job market.

The result has been a growing realization on the part of students that internships not only provide a means of testing their skills, but also provide valuable experience that can be highlighted on a resume. The obvious benefit to practitioners is a large corps of students who regard internships as a prize to be competed for, not merely a requirement to be endured.

This leads me to my second observation, which is that practitioners should place equal emphasis on selecting interns as they do on hiring permanent employees, and that we teachers should encourage them to do so. The keen competition with which students are going after internships has virtually reduced to zero the chances of a practitioner picking a "lemon"

if proper interviewing procedures are observed. I would venture to say that the practitioners who complain about the quality of their student interns are the same ones who simply call up the local college and have them "send someone over."

To qualify for an internship at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, students must be juniors or seniors, have completed a minimum of 24 quarter hours of coursework in communications, and have achieved a minimum grade point average of 2.75 (on a 4.0 scale) for all communications work completed. While not a formal requirement, students normally must complete an introductory course in the public relations option before being considered for a PR internship, although students who have demonstrated superior ability in other communications courses can be considered.

At the Tennessee Valley Authority, we devoted considerable time to interviewing prospective student interns, and we often had 15 or 20 candidates competing for the one public relations internship we offered each quarter. I am convinced that the time we spent on the front end in interviewing candidates carefully resulted in our having to dismiss only one student intern during the three years I administered the program.

My third observation is that it is important to teach students that internships are valuable not only for the experience they provide but also for the employment doors they may open up in the future. While I was employed at TVA

we were, unfortunately, not able to hire permanently any of our best student interns due to a job freeze, but we kept our ears open for PR job openings in other organizations with which we did business, particularly at other government agencies.

While I am personally not aware of any studies on internships as a significant factor in helping a communications student obtain employment after graduation, I do know that several of our interns at TVA are now gainfully employed thanks to references which we provided.

At Virginia Polytechnic Institute, I tell our students to jot down the names of individuals with whom they come in contact during their internships, not only where they are interning, but outside the organization as well. These individuals may well remember that helpful student intern when his or her resume crosses the desk as a potential employee.

My fourth observation is that the sheer numbers of students who want public relations internships are going to force teachers administering these programs to become much more creative in their search for internship opportunities. One of the problems we face at VPI is that the university is located in a community of about 30,000 population with no large industries, corporations, or government agencies nearby. Yet, we have found some excellent internships for our students, principally because our geographic location has forced us to expand our internship horizons.

For example, in addition to the more traditional internships offered by the campus public information office and

area hospitals, we have arranged positions at the local chamber of commerce, the police department, and in the office of the local state legislator. We are presently exploring the possibility of establishing a public relations internship with a local United Way agency, and several campus organizations are becoming interested in letting student interns assist them in publicity and fund raising campaigns.

While none of these are paid internships, our students are jumping at the chance to get some experience without having to leave the area. Internships can be taken for variable academic credit so that part-time as well as full-time work can be arranged. Internships which involve ten 40-hour work weeks earn the maximum credit of 15 hours, while credit for part-time work is prorated downward based upon the number of hours worked per week. The student's work is evaluated throughout the internship by a faculty adviser in consultation with the student's on-the-job supervisor. Each student is expected to submit a written report at the end of the internship which summarizes the work experience and must also provide copies of materials produced during the internship, such as press releases or brochures.

In addition, I have found that while some organizations do not need interns, they welcome the help of public relations classes in developing one-time publicity campaigns for special projects. For example, as a means of breathing some life into the traditional classroom exercise of writing press releases, I recently invited into the classroom a representative of a

local charity to explain the group's fund-raising effort. The best of the press releases produced by the class about the charity were mailed out and used by area media, and the charity is now interested in even greater involvement by the students in next year's publicity program. Thus we have opened the door to the possibility of another ongoing internship opportunity.

My fifth observation is that teachers and practitioners alike tend to underestimate the valuable contributions that a student intern can make to an organization's public relations effort if only given the chance. We involved our student interns at TVA in all phases of our public information program, with the exception of handling sensitive media inquiries, and found them not only capable of performing these duties, but discharging them quite well. I believe a key to our success was that we assigned a permanent staff member the responsibility of directing the work of the intern, rather than letting the student be pulled from several different directions, or, worse still, not be pulled at all. This provided some continuity and direction to the student's work, made sure the student was kept busy, and gave the student a supportive "counselor" with whom to work out problems.

This brings me to my sixth and final observation, which is that teachers should make every effort to avoid coming between the student and the student's internship supervisor. At Virginia Polytechnic, I let the organization with which I have place a student intern know that I am available to

work out any problems, but I try to let the student first deal directly with the company. Obviously, this provides the student with another valuable work-related experience, that of coping with the inevitable on-the-job problems which often arise between employer and employee. I am always available to the student as an advisor for work-related problems associated with the internship, but I want that same student not to depend upon me as a "crutch" in dealing with the company.

As I stated at the out-set, these are merely observations gleaned from having worked with interns and internships as both practitioner and teacher. The benefits of internships are well known to both groups, and students are now competing for these prizes in numbers which grow larger with each passing year. Thus, the demands on practitioners and teachers to provide meaningful internship experiences will also continue to increase, and the search for better ways to train potential public relations professionals will intensify. I hope these observations will aid in that search.

Notes

1. See Warren K. Agee, "Internships way out front in PR curricula changes," Journalism Educator, April 1979, pp. 6-12, 48-52.
2. See Albert Walker, "'Pro-Am' plan helps PR graduates gain experience," Journalism Educator, January 1979, pp. 14-16.
3. See William H. Peters, "'Balancing the record': Internships may contain some unexamined pitfalls," Journalism Educator, April 1975, pp. 40-42.
4. An exception is Reg Westmoreland and Douglas Starr, "PR students, professionals both learn from internships," Journalism Educator, April 1977, pp. 58-60, which does go into some detail concerning the mechanics of the North Texas State PR internship program.
5. The Tennessee Valley Authority is an independent Federal agency established by Congress in 1933 to conduct a unified program of conservation, development, and use of the resources of the Tennessee River basin and adjoining areas. Under this mandate, TVA has developed one of the largest electric power systems in the United States, serving more than 8 million people over an 80,000-square-mile area covering most of Tennessee and portions of six adjoining states.

Louis M. Gwin, Jr.
Department of Communication Studies
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
Blacksburg, Virginia

Abstract

PR Internships: A View From Both Sides of the Fence

Despite increasing emphasis being placed on public relations internships by schools and departments of journalism and mass communications, little has been written about the subject. This is due in part to the assumption that PR internships differ little from newspaper internships, which have been covered extensively by the literature. Yet, the author believes that significant differences do exist and offers a number of observations concerning PR internships which have been distilled from his experiences while working with student interns as both a public relations practitioner and teacher.

There is a growing awareness among students that public relations internships provide not only a means for testing skills, but also valuable experience which can be placed on a resume. This has created keen competition among students for internships, thereby providing practitioners with a considerable talent pool from which to select competent interns.

Internships also provide students with future employment opportunities through contacts made during the internship, further heightening competition among students for internships. This has required teachers to become more inventive in developing meaningful internship opportunities for students, and the author describes some of the steps taken by the Department of Communication Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University to meet this challenge.

Interns can make a meaningful contribution to an organization's public relations effort if their work is properly supervised and directed. Such direction should come principally from the organization utilizing the intern and not from the intern's academic advisor.